

2024 National Black Business Month Interview Series

Interviewees: Carine and Farah Saint Jean, Spectacular Affairs

This interview has been shortened for length and clarity.

DJ: In what ways did your identity inspire you to start a business?

CSJ: We were brought up in a religious home. Our father was a minister, and that really instilled in us some very strong values. We knew who we were, and we served our community. It gave us this sense of excellence that we needed to be the best, because we were the leaders in our community. And it really drove us to become the event planners and designers that we are. Farah has a background in music and management, and I've been a professional singer and educator, and all these things came from seeing our parents do plays and productions in the church. So, that was part of our identity was as Black women in the community, and it all played into who we became as event planners.

FSJ: The ideas of family and love were important in becoming wedding planners. Weddings were very important in the church – getting married was the “right” thing to do. So being part of that on a different level was where we took our skill set. Being female, believing in love, and eventually doing my own wedding, were really the catalysts to going into wedding planning.

DJ: You talked about faith and community and your exposure to events. I'm curious how those things and others influence the way you run your business. How do those identities and experiences help you differentiate yourselves in the market?

FSJ: We were known for doing the best gospel concerts in our community. My father became very popular among the youth because his kids were the special asset that made him stand out among the other ministers in the community. We had the understanding that if you excel at what you're doing, you'll have people follow you or believe in you. That makes you want to do things well.

We have the same principles with our business. We want to give the best possible service. So, if that sometimes means we even have to put a bit of our money in, we know we're going to get it back in return.

Excellence is important, but so is loving what you do, and being kind to people. That's the environment we grew up in. That's the church. We're willing to go the extra mile. We call our business Spectacular Affairs, so whatever we do, it's going to be spectacular. We have to live up to the name.

CSJ: We are Black women at, dare I say, the higher end of a field where we are a few. And we have to prove ourselves a lot more. So, with that said, we're always going to go the extra mile, like Farah said, sometimes putting in our own money just to get that perfect look, or taking things to another level so we can be appreciated and seen on the same level as our counterparts.

That's what we strive to do – we really built our business on being excellent. I think the term “Black Excellence” is really the standard. We really believe in that Black Excellence.

DJ: You both have touched on this a little bit – your different identities. How do you think about all of your different identities as you think about future growth?

FSJ: You know, this is something I think about a lot. Carine and I have had to really think about this because there are two sides to it – as people from the Church, we've had people tell us we should be targeting that audience. “You should be known as the so-and-so of this-and-that Church.” But we have to be careful with that because our father was such a well-known Pastor in the Haitian community, we have to be careful not to misrepresent him. Therefore, we've made the conscious decision not to focus on the church community.

CSJ: And with that said, we do serve the community occasionally. Farah is a healthcare manager, has worked in a health facility for many years. We do corporate events, we do bar mitzvahs, we do all sorts of things. We travel all over the country and all over the world. We just came back from Jamaica. We just came back from Hawaii. That's what's amazing about what was just a little dream of some girls from New York City.

I'm a mother, I've been married for 22 years so I can pull from that experience. I was also an educator for 18 years, so there are so many facets of our identities that lend themselves to our business. What are our future plans? We're trying to scale and keep on being recognized and seen as the authorities that we are. We have been doing this for 20 years now.

We've worked with so many people, including celebrities, and its because of our relationships and who we are. It doesn't matter that we're Black females. It's what we give, what we present, and who we are. They get to know us and they know that we are capable of delivering and doing what we said we were going to do – which is Spectacular Affairs.

FSJ: Sometimes I do think about being Black. I must remind myself that, as Black people, we're always working harder to get things, to get recognized for things. I had that in mind recently in Hawaii, when on the day of the wedding some things were not going the way they should. I have to think that my white counterparts would have been able to express themselves right away, but I had to reign myself in because I didn't want to be seen as the “angry Black female,” you know? We're the only Black people here, we're representatives, and often people are expecting the negative from us. Being in a world where we're the only Black people, a lot of times you have to

be careful about how you're representing. It can sometimes feel like a burden, but it's a responsibility that we take on, because if we have the ability and the skill set, we should represent our people. I do this as a Haitian person too. I don't see my skin color as a challenge, it may be a challenge for others, but for me, I know that I'm a human being with blood running through my veins.

God's given me skills, gifts, intelligence, ability, and opportunity. And if I can grasp those opportunities, I do. If there's a grant being offered to Black women, I should apply for it, because it's hard for us to get certain things because people look at us based on our skin. If given the opportunity to have something, I'll take it and won't waste it.

DJ: I appreciate that. The varied experiences you have as a Black person really do prepare you to navigate sticky situations.

FSJ: It's wonderful to be able to do something that is yours. To not depend on others for financial survival, and to be able to take control of my life. We want to teach Carine's son – my nephew, and our niece the value of working. We want to show them that they have opportunities. And if they see people like themselves in us, then everything is possible for them.